IN THE CLAIMS

Claims 1-39. (Cancelled).

Claim 40. (Currently amended) A method for determining hepatitis C virus specific seroconversion antibodies, comprising incubating a human sample suspected to be a seroconversion sample containing hepatitis C virus specific antibodies taken from a subject under reducing conditions ~~which prevent formation of covalent, cross-linked molecular aggregates,~~ with at least one polypeptide consisting of an amino acid sequence found in hepatitis C virus protein NS3 region, which is immunologically reactive with said hepatitis C virus specific seroconversion antibodies, and determining binding of said antibodies to said polypeptide to recognize seroconversion in said subject, wherein said polypeptide has been modified at ~~at~~ least one cysteine residue.

Claim 41. (Previously presented) The method of claim 40, wherein said cysteine residue has been modified by covalent attachment of a modifying group.

Claim 42. (Previously presented) The method of claim 40, wherein said cysteine residue has been replaced by another amino acid.

Claim 43. (Currently amended) A method for determining hepatitis C virus specific seroconversion antibodies, comprising incubating a human sample suspected to be a seroconversion sample containing hepatitis C virus specific antibodies taken from a subject under reducing conditions ~~which prevent formation of covalent, cross-linked molecular aggregates,~~ with at least one polypeptide consisting of an amino acid sequence found in hepatitis C virus protein NS3 region, which is immunologically reactive with said hepatitis C virus specific seroconversion antibodies, and

determining binding of said antibodies to said polypeptide to recognize seroconversion in said subject, wherein said polypeptide consists of (a) at least amino acids 21-282 of SEQ ID NO: 9, and (b) a contiguous sequence of less than 20 amino acids that is not found in hepatitis C virus proteins, wherein (b) has been concatenated to the N or C terminus of (a)~~, or an isolated polypeptide which is at least 90% homologous thereto,~~ wherein at least one cysteine of said polypeptide is modified either by replacing it with another artificial or natural amino acid, or by a modifying group.

Claim 44. (Previously presented) The method of Claim 41, wherein said modifying group is maleimidodioctylamine, N-methly-maleinimide, iodoacetic acid, and iodoacetamide.

Claim 45. (Previously presented) The method of claim 42, wherein said cysteine residue has been replaced by serine, or γ-aminobutyric acid.

Claim 46. (Previously presented) The method of claim 43, wherein said polypeptide consists of at least amino acids 19 to 290 of SEQ ID NO: 9, and no more than amino acids 9 to 300 of SEQ ID NO: 9.

Claim 47. (Previously presented) The method of claim 43, wherein said polypeptide consists of at least amino acids 16 to 293 of SEQ ID NO: 9, and no more than amino acids 12 to 297 of SEQ ID NO: 9.

Claim 48. (Previously presented) The method of claim 41, wherein said polypeptide consists of amino acids 14 to 295 of SEQ ID NO: 2.

Claim 49. (Cancelled)